

DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION PROCESS OF A EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO MODEL FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

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INTRODUCTION

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed and piloted by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, from 1998 to 2000. It was launched on a pan-European level during the European Year of Languages as a tool to support the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism (http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?L=E&M=/main_pages/welcome.html).

The ELP is a concrete attempt to harmonise foreign language teaching activities within the European context and to improve the quality of communication amongst European people, who have different languages and cultural backgrounds. The ELP is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe (Council of Europe 1998; 2001). The CEFR describes foreign language proficiency levels as A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. Each level has verbal descriptors in the form of can-do statements relating to five language skill areas; listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing (Mirici 2000; North 2000; Little 2005). There are some critics about the limitations of the CEFR in the development of comparable examinations and tests (Weir 2005), however it can also be considered as a tool which guarantees an opportunity based education. The ELP allows learners to monitor their own learning process on a life-long basis as well as to develop respect for cultural identities and diversity. It takes its roots from the principles of *learner autonomy* and *self-assessment* in the language learning process (Holec 1994, Council of Europe 1998; Glover *et al.* 2005). It is believed that this project will enhance transparency of course content, syllabuses and qualifications, will promote international co-operation in the field of modern languages and in turn plurilingualism and intercultural understanding. In this aspect it can be considered as a tool which promotes cross cultural and international approaches in the curriculum development. Furthermore, it can be considered as a tool which promotes developing communicative skills to express oneself and understand others as well as to develop personality for intercultural awareness and to respect otherness both as a learner model and as a representative of a particular culture. The ELP is made up of three parts; the Language Biography, the Dossier and the Language Passport. In the Language Biography the owner keeps records of his/her foreign language learning process and crosscultural experiences. In the Dossier all sorts of documents are kept, and the Language Passport functions as the summary of the Language Biography and the Dossier. Besides, the document contains a grid²⁶ where the learners can describe his/her language competences according to common criteria and which can serve as a complement to customary certificates (Council of

Europe 2005). As a general principle all competence is valued, regardless whether gained inside or outside of formal education. The ELP is the property of the learner. There are many occasions when a language user may wish to present an up to date ELP: a transfer to a new school, entry to higher education, beginning a language course, meeting a careers advisor, or an application for a new post. In these cases the ELP is addressed to persons who have a role in decisions which are important for the owner of the portfolio. A learner may also be interested in having such documentation for him/herself. In this aspect it can be considered as a tool which introduces a transparency method in learning a foreign language across Europe.

RESOLUTION ON THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO

(Adopted at the 20th Session of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe, Krakow, Poland, 15-17 October 2000). The European Ministers of Education, meeting in Krakow for the 20th session of their Standing Conference,

Considering

- the conclusions and recommendations of the 19th Session of the Standing Conference of the European Ministers of Education;
- Recommendation No. R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States concerning Modern Languages;
- Recommendation 1383 (1998) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on Linguistic Diversification;
- the encouraging results of the PILOT PROJECTS conducted in 15 member States in an initial pilot phase (1998 to 2000) in order to explore the practical potential, feasibility and effects of a European Language Portfolio

Recommend that: the Governments of member states, in harmony with their education policies

- implement or create conditions favorable for the implementation and wide use of the ELP according to the Principles and Guidelines laid down by the Education Committee;
- where it is decided to introduce the ELP, they:
 - ask a competent body (such as a national committee) to examine ELP models for compulsory education, to establish whether they meet the agreed criteria, and to forward them with a recommendation to the European Validation Committee;
 - ask the competent body to monitor compliance with the Principles and Guidelines at the national, regional, local level;
 - create conditions to enable learners to use ELPs throughout formal and informal education;
 - assist teachers in the effective use of the ELP through appropriate training programs and support;
 - take steps to ensure that an ELP is acknowledged as a valid record of competence regardless of its country, region, sector or institution of origin;
 - facilitate co-operation between education institutions and other relevant agencies at all levels, be they public or private, with a view to the harmonious development and implementation of ELPs; g) monitor the dissemination and impact of the ELP and report the findings to the Council of Europe regularly, and at least once every three years.

The Committee of Ministers to Member States concerning Modern Languages recommends, among other measures, the development and use by learners of a personal document (European Language Portfolio) to record their qualifications and other significant linguistic and cultural experiences in an internationally transparent manner as part of an effort to extend and diversify language learning at all levels in a lifelong perspective. The Ministers of Education of all the member States of the Council of Europe recommended that governments, in keeping with their education policy, support the introduction of an ELP. From the statements above it can be seen that ELP development and use is highly encouraged, but each country has the flexibility to introduce new criteria with the approval of the Validation Committee. The Validation Committee is appointed by the Education Committee of the Council of Europe to assure the conformity of ELP models to the Common European Principles and Guidelines. It is composed of 9 members nominated by the Education Committee and meets twice yearly. The Committee may designate up to five consultants to guide its work. All ELP models should be submitted to the Validation Committee for its approval and should conform to the Rules for the Accreditation of ELP models (Council of Europe 2007). Schaerer (2008) reports the numbers of ELPs produced, distributed, and used as in the following table (See Table: 1).

Table: 1
Reported numbers of ELPs produced, distributed, used

School/academic year	Cumulative total of individual ELPs produced/distributed * 1	Learners using an ELP as reported by school/academic year * 2	Number of ELP models validated during the calendar year cumulative * 3	Average number of copies in use for all validated ELP models * 4	Number of multipliers formed during the design and pilot phase cumulative * 5
Up to 2000	~	~ 30.000	6	5000	300 300
2001-2002	~	~ 135.000	19 25	5400	950 1250
2002-2003	~	~ 220.000	16 41	5400	800 2250
2003-2004	~	~ 315.000	17 58	5400	850 3100
2004-2005	~ 1.250.000	~ 514.000	11 69	7500	550 3650
2005-2006	~ 2.000.000	~ 504.000 rev.	4 73	6900	200 3850
2006-2007	~ 2.500.000	~ 584.000	15 88	6600	750 4600
2007-2008	~ 3.000.000	~ ?	11 99	?	550 5150

* 1 Not all the ELPs produced are distributed and not all ELPs distributed are being used

* 2 These totals are composed of ongoing and in some cases planned projects

* 3 Validated ELP models are contextualization of the common principles and guidelines

* 4 Validation stimulates ELP dissemination; the average number of copies in use is an indication of impact

* 5 The suggestion here is that designing ELP models helps form multipliers (the figures are speculative)

Turkey, as one of the member nations of the Council of Europe since 1949, has just²⁸ completed the process of piloting the use of ELP and has adapted the ELP

implementation to the national educational system. The Ministry of National Education has just introduced a new English language curriculum based on the CEFR and ELP and aims to introduce a nationwide ELP use through electronic format of the validated models for 10-14 and 15-18 years of age groups. Both models are accessible on the website of the Ministry (www.meb.gov.tr) and every Turkish citizen is allowed to access either model by using his/her Citizenship Identity Number as the code number for free access to the models. Through such implementation the Ministry introduces an environment friendly project avoiding use of millions of paper hardcopies as well as a practical use of the models by both portfolio owners and the third parties including teachers avoiding the difficulty of carrying a file of tens of pages document.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ELP BILFEN MODEL FOR 10-14 AGE GROUPS

The aim and function of all ELP models are: a) to motivate learners by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills at all levels; b) to provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills they have acquired (to be consulted, for example, when they are moving to a higher learning level or seeking employment at home or abroad (Council of Europe 2005). An ELP model, pedagogically, should:

- enhance the motivation of the learners to improve their ability to communicate in different languages, to learn additional languages, and to seek new intercultural experiences;
- help learners to reflect upon their objectives, ways of learning and success in language learning, to plan their learning, and to learn autonomously;
- encourage learners to enhance their plurilingual and intercultural experience, for example through contacts and visits, reading, use of the media, and projects (Council of Europe 2005).

Through its reporting function an ELP model reflects the holder's proficiency level in other languages and linguistic and cross-cultural experiences in a comprehensive, informative, transparent and reliable way. The instruments contained in the ELP help learners to take stock of the levels of competence they have reached in their learning of one or several foreign languages in order to enable them to inform others in a detailed and internationally comparable manner.

As one of the models validated by the Council of Europe Validation Committee with 79.2006 accreditation number, the BILFEN model for 10-14 years of age groups aims to reflect all these philosophical characteristics in the development process.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF THE ELP BILFEN MODEL FOR 10-14 YEARS OF AGE GROUPS

BILFEN schools educate 3500 students in 15 schools at kindergarten up to middle school (Year 8, Age 14) level using the most up-to-date systems and approaches. The schools are situated in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city. They aim to use the ELP to promote effective teaching and intend to support all 10-14 year old children in private schools where intensive foreign language programs are implemented.

The portfolio prepared by a team consisting of teachers, academics and experienced²⁹ managers for young learners supports learning by developing the students'

awareness of the principles of 'learner autonomy', 'self-assessment' and 'cultural diversity', and will be available for widespread use throughout the country.

The ELP BILFEN model for 10-14 year olds was prepared in four phases: training, drafting, trialling and validation. The whole process took just over a year to complete.

The Training Phase

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) attempts to describe language proficiency through validated descriptors couched in terms of outcomes. These descriptors are supplemented by a broad compendium of useful information on consensus views regarding language learning, teaching and assessment (Weir 2005). Therefore training phase of the portfolio preparation team was of great importance and in the training phase the following stages were followed:

- The CEFR, principles and familiarization. The project team established basic principles for the conduct of the project, discussing current trends towards the internationalization of education (Teichler 2004), mobility, plurilingualism, multiculturalism and a European identity. The team discussed the philosophy of measures such as the Socrates Program and the need for harmonization and standard setting in the European context. The CEFR (Council of Europe 2001: 1- 42 and 177-196) chapters on the political and educational context, approach and common reference levels and the final chapter on assessment were especially useful in this regard.
- ELP applications. The team examined and discussed the experiences of ELP users in many European countries. This encouraged the team and at the same time provided a sense of urgency and a desire to catch up with others.
- Team selection and training. The team consisted of a wider group of 20 and a core team of 8 heads of department. Training involved a detailed look at the content and use of ELPs to support the preparation of the project plan.
- Project plan. The project plan served as a road map and timetable for completion of the four phases of the project. The plan also identified criteria for the physical design of the portfolio, its ideal size, weight and appearance.
- The teaching context. Having identified principles for the portfolio, the team focused on the school curriculum that the portfolio would have to fit. The team looked in detail at the content and approach of intensive foreign language programs for 10-14 year olds in 5 large private school groups in Turkey.
- Accredited portfolios review. The team examined in detail ELPs that served similar age groups, especially the portfolios prepared for young learners in Italy and Sweden.

The Drafting Phase

Similar to Alderson's comment (2001) most foreign language teachers in Turkey feel that the already existing descriptors in the validated ELP models are too limited to adapt to their teaching situations in terms of the objectives of their curriculum.

Therefore after the training phase the steering committee of the ELP Bilfen Models was in need of a drafting phase, in which the following procedure was implemented: 30

- "Can do" statement writing. The team set about producing statements that were deemed to be appropriate for the 10-14 age group. The target level for the end of this period was Vantage, or B2 level (Council of Europe 2001: 23). The objectives, language functions, themes and specific notions, socio cultural competence and skill section of the Vantage curriculum were used (Van Ek and Trim 2001).
- Harmonization of content and context. The team worked to ensure that the statements matched both the cognitive level and the life experiences of the students. Discussions were held with experienced university specialists and classroom teachers concerning the evaluation of the learning process and the formation of examples for each statement.
- Weekly development meetings. Sixteen meetings took place between March and July 2005, as the team worked through the project plan. Statements were refined and replaced.
- Checking draft portfolio against guidelines. The draft portfolio was taken by all team members, who went through each section following the Council of Europe Guidelines (<http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/documents/keyrefdocs.doc>).

The Trialling Phase

Great store is set on the CEFR being useful in helping define objectives for pedagogy and assessment (Council of Europe 2001) but deficiencies still remain (Weir 2005). What is perhaps of wider interest is the high stability in the values of CEFR descriptors in an instrument consisting of 50% new formulations (North 2002). In order to create new formulations suitable for the Turkey context the following trialling phase was implemented.

- Initial responses from stakeholders. Three versions of the portfolio were produced, and the school collected view from a sample of language teachers, parents and academics. Comments received were extremely helpful, for example, the physical size and weight of the portfolio was reduced in the light of responses.
- Trialling of drafts. The three versions were used by different groups of students. The versions differed in the number of statements and the amount of detail included.
- Students and parents review. The students and parent who had trialled the portfolios gave their comments. This provided further opportunities for refining the statements, and a final draft version was produced.

The Validation Phase

Before the model was used in the education system with the Council of Europe (CoE) logo, it was submitted to the validation committee in Strasbourg. For this phase the following stages were followed:

- The final version of the portfolio was prepared and submitted to the CoE.
- The report from the Validation Committee identified some areas for improvement. Statements were refined still further and sections were added, modified or removed.
- The portfolio was resubmitted for validation and approved.

RESULTS

- The final model (ELP BILFEN Model. 2006) was prepared specifically for children at private schools in Turkey.
- The portfolio is in three languages; Turkish, English and German to reflect the owner's development of competences in a number of languages and includes key headings in these languages. In addition, in each section of the portfolio the purpose of the related section is explained clearly.
- Validated descriptors of the Bolzano-Alto Adige model no 69.2005 model were used and a limited number of new descriptors and examples relevant to the Turkish educational system were developed.
- In the Biography section students can reflect upon and record their language and intercultural competences for all languages regardless of in or outside of school.
- In the Linguistic Experiences part of the Language Biography section the portfolio owner is invited to reflect upon the languages learned in or out of the school to promote plurilingualism.
- The Language Passport is adapted from the standard passport through suggestions of the Council of Europe Language Policy Division. In the back of the Language Passport there are also soft pages for the teacher assessment. The owner may ask the teacher to assess her/his level of proficiency.
- The self-assessment grid includes the levels between A1 and B2 in the Language Passport section of the portfolio as it is not an adult portfolio. In the Dossier part students are encouraged to select examples of all the work they have produced for all languages they have learned inside or outside school.
- The portfolio is backed up with a booklet of "Guide for Teachers and Parents", in which the whole self-assessment grid (reflecting A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 levels) is given in the Teacher and Parents' Guide in three languages, Turkish, English and German.

CONCLUSIONS

The Council of Europe organized a series of seminars such as *Multilingual Comprehension in Europe* (European Commission 1997) to help member States which did not take part in the pilot scheme to develop and introduce their own portfolios. Various models are being or will be developed and validated in Council of Europe member States depending on the age of learners and national contexts including ELPs for higher and adult education developed by a number of international NGOs. Similarly, every member state should organize seminars or symposiums to share ideas and broaden their viewpoint concerning ELP development, implementation and dissemination. This can be done through collaboration between Ministries of Education, national contact persons, portfolio developers, academics and teachers (Mirici 2007).

Educational authorities or institutions undertaking to produce an ELP model are encouraged to ask for guidance and a preliminary reaction from the Validation Committee at an early stage (Council of Europe 2005). This helps to avoid obstacles within the validation process. Portfolio developers should always be in touch with the secretariat of the Validation Committee in Strasbourg.

It is of great importance that developers remember the necessity for all models to conform to the agreed principles and to be approved by the European Validation Committee in order to use the Council of Europe logo. All documents supplied by

the Council of Europe Language Policy Division should be examined carefully and developers should refer to these documents in every step they plan to make.

Most importantly, developers should always remember that the ELP is a possession of its owner- the language learner. Schaerer (2005) reports that widespread implementation is to a considerable degree dependent on easy, in many cases free access to ELPs by learners and teachers. They range from the free distribution of ELPs to an entire age group of learners for periods of one to several school years to a wide variety of arrangements using CDs and web support as well as printing, selling and distribution of the documents through publishers. An ELP model should be user friendly in terms of its availability as well as its design, size and the language contained in it.

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